Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

Northern Mariana Islands

Population: 0.05 millions (#216 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 464 square km. Consisting of fourteen islands in the North Pacific Ocean north of Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands are located between the Philippines and Hawaii. The islands' geology differs by location, as northern islands are volcanic, whereas southern islands are composed of limestone and surrounded by coral reefs. Tropical climate occurs year round with dry (December to June) and wet (July to October) seasons. Volcanoes and typhoons are natural hazards. Environmental issues include ground water contamination, proper waste disposal, and the protection of endangered species. Most of the fourteen islands are uninhabited. The Northern Mariana Islands is a commonwealth of the United States.

Peoples

Filipino: 35.3%

Chamorro: 23.9%

Chinese: 6.8%

Other Pacific Islander: 6.4%

Carolinian: 4.6%

Korean: 4.2%

Other Asian: 3.7%

Other: 2.4%

Mixed: 12.7%

The Northern Mariana Islands have exhibited significant population decline for many consecutive years due to emigration.

Population: 51,994 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: –0.52% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.76 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 73.6 male, 78.1 female (2018)

Languages: Philippine languages (32.8%), Chamorro (24.1%), English (17.0%), Chinese (6.8%), other Pacific island languages (10.1%), other Asian languages (7.3%), other (1.9%). Chamorro and English are the official languages.

Literacy: 97% (2017)

History

Chamorros inhabited the islands prior to European exploration. The Spanish landed in the sixteenth century and ruled until 1898 when the islands were sold to Germany. In World War I, Japan annexed the islands and developed a sugar cane industry. Following the Japanese invasion of Guam in World War II, Chamorros from the Northern Mariana Islands participated in the Japanese administration of Guam. This resulted in a division between the Chamorros in the Northern Marianas and Guam during the subsequent decades. The United States invaded the Northern Marianas in 1944, and less than one thousand of the 30,000 Japanese troops stationed on Saipan survived.[1] In the 1970s, the Northern Mariana Islands determined not to seek independence from the United States but rather to become a United States territory. In 1976, a covenant came into force that declared the islands a commonwealth of the United States.

Culture

Filipino, Chinese, Micronesian, and Chamorro cultural practices are most apparent in the Northern Mariana Islands, as these ethnic groups support the largest populations. Saipan underwent a dramatic cultural change between 1980 and 2000 as the population more than tripled as a result of immigration. The Catholic Church has strongly influenced local culture, as the indigenous Chamorro and most immigrant groups are predominantly Catholic. Cuisine consists of seafood and many dishes common to the Philippines, Oceania, and East Asia.

Economy

GDP per capita: $24,500 (2016) [41.6% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: N/A

Corruption Index: N/A

Financial assistance from the United States and tourism stabilizes the economy. Rapid economic growth in recent years has been attributed to Korean and Chinese tourists visiting the islands in greater numbers, and expansion of casino gambling. Services employ 88.1% of the workforce and generate 40.2% of the GDP. Industry employs 10% of the workforce and generates 58.1% of the GDP. Additional industries include banking, construction, fishing, clothing, and handicrafts. Vegetables, melons, nuts, livestock, poultry, eggs, and fish are common agricultural products.

Faiths

Christian: 81.3%

Other: 18.7%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 40,000

Latter-day Saints – 839 – 1

Jehovah's Witnesses – 243 – 5

Seventh Day Adventists – 313 – 4

Religion

Most adhere to the Catholic Church. Chamorro maintain strong ethno-religious ties with the Catholic Church. Other Christian denominations comprise most of the remaining population. Some Asians are Buddhist.

Religious Freedom

The United States constitution protects religious freedom and is upheld by the local government. There have been no reported instances of societal abuse of religious freedom.

Largest Towns

Urban: 91.6% (2018)

San Antonio, Garapan, **Koblerville, San Vincente, Tanapag, Chalan Kanoa, Kagman, Dandan,** Gualo Rai**, Susupe.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the ten largest towns has a Church congregation. Forty-six percent (46%) of the population resides in the ten most populous towns.

Church History and Background

Latter-day Saint servicemen in the United States military were the first known members to live on Saipan during World War II, first arriving in 1944. Among them was future apostle Elder L. Tom Perry.[2] 190 Latter-day Saint servicemen gathered for a conference in 1945.[3] In 1975, the Church reestablished a permanent presence on Saipan when two full-time missionaries were assigned from the Hawaii Honolulu Mission.[4] The Saipan Branch was organized in the late 1970s and was assigned to the Guam District in the early 1980s. The first missionaries visited Rota and Tinian in the late 1970s and were later temporarily assigned to serve on the islands in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[5] The Northern Mariana Islands were assigned to the Micronesia Guam Mission in 1980. An addition to the Saipan Branch meetinghouse was necessitated by membership growth in 1988.[6] The San Jose Branch operated on Tinian between 1990 and 1997 and was discontinued as many of the members left the island.[7] A member group has periodically operated on Tinian since this time, including during the mid-2010s.

In 1996, President Hinckley briefly met with local members and missionaries while refueling his plane on a visit to the Philippines.[8] In 2005, President Boyd K. Packer and Elder David A. Bednar held a member meeting.[9] Elder L. Tom Perry visited Saipan following the creation of the Barrigada Guam Stake in late 2010.[10] The Saipan Branch became a ward in the newly created Barrigada Guam Stake. The congregation meets in the Gualo Rai area. Missionaries infrequently visit Rota and Tinian today. The Church donated one million dollars to the Red Cross to assist in disaster relief in the Northern Mariana Islands in early 2019.[11]

There were fewer than one hundred members in 1987. There were 280 members in August 1988, and most members were from Micronesia, Palau, the United States, American Samoa, the Philippines, and Saipan.[12] Membership reached 400 in 1993 and 500 in 1997.[13] By year-end 2000, there were 856 members. During the 2000s, membership increased to 932 in 2002 and declined to 888 in 2003, 811 in 2005, 777 in 2007, 735 in 2009, and 632 in 2010. Membership has steadily increased in the 2010s to 756 in 2012, 793 in 2015, and 839 in 2018. In 2018, one in sixty-two people, or 1.61% of the population, was a member on Church records. Sixty of Saipan's 300 Latter-day Saints met with President Hinckley in 1996.[14] In late 2010, full-time missionaries reported that there were approximately 200 active members, or 27% of total membership. Returned missionary estimates during the early and mid 2010s indicated that active membership vacillated from 100-200. In 2019, active members appeared no greater than 150, or 18% of total church membership. Approximately 60% of members in the ward are Filipino, whereas the remainder of members are primarily Caucasian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are translated into Japanese, Korean, Chinese (traditional and simplified characters), and Tagalog. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith is translated into Chamorro. The Liahona magazine has twelve Japanese,

Korean, Chinese, and Tagalog issues a year. The Northern Mariana Islands pertains to the Cebu City Philippines Temple district, but will be reassigned to the Yigo Guam Temple once the temple is completed.

Opportunities

There are no restrictions on religious freedom. Latter-day Saints proselyte, worship, and assemble freely. Mission outreach benefits from a predominantly Christian population representing various ethnic groups from Micronesia, East Asia, the Philippines, and the United States that has fostered the integration of differing ethnic groups into the same congregation. Small geographic size necessitates the establishment of few mission outreach centers for national outreach. The Saipan Ward provides mission outreach to the entire island of Saipan, although some areas of the island are less reached due to distance from the Church-built meetinghouse. Full-time missionaries regularly visit and proselyte in most urban areas on Saipan, indicating that up to 90% of the population may be reached by the Church. Ten full-time missionaries from Yap, the Philippines, the Marshall Islands, and the United States served on Saipan in 1996.[15] Multiple missionary companionships served on Saipan in early 2011, labored throughout Saipan, and appeared to baptize converts regularly. The Church is unlikely to organize additional mission outreach centers elsewhere on the island due to its small geographic size, tiny population, and low member activity rates. The establishment of additional congregations in urban areas with concentrated numbers of Latter-day Saints may help improve member activity rates in some areas. Language-specific congregations may help improve member activity rates, especially among Filipinos. The establishment of additional congregations to spur new leadership, decrease travel times, and generate local communities may increase active membership over time.

Church services are held in English, which is spoken by most members. Church materials and scriptures are available in the native or most regularly-spoken language of nearly the entire population. In 1988, the branch president was from American Samoa.[16] The leadership of the Saipan Ward appeared to be self-sufficient as evidenced by the branch maturing into a ward in late 2010. The Church would have been unable to organize the Barrigada Guam Stake in 2010 without the inclusion of the congregation on Saipan due to lacking numbers of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders on Guam.

Challenges

The Northern Mariana Islands has held the dubious position of the nation or territory with the most Latter-day Saints with only one congregation for approximately two decades, as the sole Saipan Ward has a membership of 839 as of year-end 2018. Low member activity and poor convert retention rates appear to be the result of a combination of quick-baptism tactics in the 1990s and 2000s on Saipan combined with many nonnative members originating from areas that exhibit low member activity rates, such as the Philippines and Guam. Dependence on full-time missionaries for teaching, baptizing, fellowshipping, and reactivating efforts have reduced local member-missionary involvement. It is unclear whether progress in the 2010s had occurred regarding reactivation and convert retention initiatives. However, given that only one ward operates on the island and church membership has increased by approximately 200 during the 2010s suggests minimal improvements in member activity and convert retention. Emigration does not appear to have adversely affected member activity rates, but high rates of member turnover have created administrative challenges and frustrated leadership growth. Nominalism in the Catholic Church among Filipinos, Micronesians, and others has challenged efforts to instill habits of regular church attendance and engage investigators and converts into individual religious practices like personal scripture reading, prayer, and living Church teachings on a daily basis. Non-Christian Asians require missionary approaches tailored to their religious and cultural backgrounds. The strong ethnic ties among Chamorro and Carolinians to the Catholic Church create obstacles for mission outreach.

There is no Internet outreach specialized to Saipan or other islands. None of the Carolinian languages have Church materials. Temple trips likely occur as a stake. The new Yigo Guam Temple will significantly improve accessibility to the temple for members in the Northern Mariana Islands once the temple is completed.

Member activity rates appear lower than most Micronesian nations and territories. Many nations or territories with over 700 nominal members often have two to four congregations, whereas the Northern Mariana Islands has only one. Other mission-oriented Christian groups operate in the Northern Mariana Islands, and some maintain multiple congregations. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported nearly as many active members as Latter-day Saints in 2009 yet operate five congregations. Seventh-Day Adventists report twice as many members as active Latter-day Saints, yet operate four congregations in the islands.

Prospects

The advancement of the sole branch to ward status in late 2010 demonstrates that the sizeable, self-sufficient local leadership and active membership body on Saipan is capable of fulfilling the responsibilities and demands merited by a ward. The inclusion of the islands’ entire membership into a single unit may have compromised member activity rates and deterred the development of additional leadership on a greater scale, as leadership positions are limited and activities occur in a single location. The creation of additional congregations in lesser-reached communities may warrant future consideration to improve member activity rates, stimulate local leadership development, and promote long-term self-sustainable growth. However, large-scale emigration from the islands, transient membership, and limited mission resources may restrict medium-term expansion of outreach.

[1] “Northern Mariana Islands,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 22 January 2011.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Mariana_Islands#History

[2] “Early beginnings,” LDS Church News, 18 October 1997.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28725/Early-beginnings.html

[3] “This week in Church history,” LDS Church News, 7 January 1995.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/25661/This-week-in-Church-history.html

[4] “Early beginnings,” LDS Church News, 18 October 1997.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28725/Early-beginnings.html

[5] “Northern Mariana Islands,” Deseret News 2011 Church News Almanac, p. 549–550.

[6] “From around the world,” LDS Church News, 12 August 1988.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17740/From-around-the-world.html

[7] “Northern Mariana Islands,” Deseret News 2011 Church News Almanac, p. 549–550.

[8] “Final stop: ‘Just one more meeting’ in Saipan,” LDS Church News, 8 June 1996.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28166/Final-stop-Just-one-more-meeting-in-Saipan.html

[9] Hill, Greg. “New ‘beginnings’ in southeastern Asia,” LDS Church News, 12 March 2005.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/46985/New-beginnings-in-southeastern-Asia.html

[10] “Constructing a chapel and testimonies,” LDS Church News, 15 January 2011.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/60363/Constructing-a-chapel-and-testimonies.html

[11] Gardiner, Emmy. “Since October, LDS Charities has donated $1 million to American Red Cross for typhoon relief. Here’s who it has helped.” The Church News. 25 January 2019.
https://www.thechurchnews.com/global/2019-01-25/since-october-lds-charities-has-donated-dollar1-million-to-american-red-cross-fo

[12] “From around the world,” LDS Church News, 12 August 1988.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17740/From-around-the-world.html

[13] “Early beginnings,” LDS Church News, 18 October 1997.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28725/Early-beginnings.html

[14] “Final stop: ‘Just one more meeting’ in Saipan,” LDS Church News, 8 June 1996.
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[15] “Final stop: ‘Just one more meeting’ in Saipan,” LDS Church News, 8 June 1996.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28166/Final-stop-Just-one-more-meeting-in-Saipan.html

[16] “From around the world,” LDS Church News, 12 August 1988.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17740/From-around-the-world.html